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WIDER Working Paper 2018/1

**The use of social accountability mechanisms by
Syrian diaspora organizations providing aid in
the Syrian crisis**

Mounah Abdel-Samad* and Shawn Flanigan†

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Abstract: This paper presents data from a study of Syrian diaspora organizations providing assistance to conflict-affected Syrians in Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Using interview data from leaders in three Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations, this paper examines the social mechanisms used to ensure accountability within the challenging environments where the organizations operate. We find that Syrian diaspora organizations benefit from informal social accountability mechanisms that derive from individuals' social network ties. Personal, social forms of accountability are particularly valuable to these organizations because these mechanisms help circumvent uncertainty and challenges in the operational environment. These findings reflect an important theme in the extant literature on diaspora philanthropy: diaspora members may have an advantage over other actors because of dense personal networks that make them adept at identifying dependable partners and enforcing agreements even in places where banking and legal systems are fragile. The leaders in our study rely on trusted individuals as a mechanism to ensure financial accountability and to assess the trustworthiness of potential partners on the ground in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey.

Keywords: Syria, diaspora philanthropy, accountability, forced migration, non-governmental organizations

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1 Introduction

The Syrian conflict has produced what many consider the largest humanitarian crisis since World War II, with estimates that over 4.8 million people have fled Syria and 7.6 million more have been internally displaced (UNHCR 2015, 2016). As large-scale government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) struggle to respond, what strategies and comparative advantages might Syrian diaspora non-profits have when navigating this complex operational environment? In an effort to address this broad question, this paper presents data from an inductive, exploratory study of Syrian diaspora organizations providing assistance to conflict-affected Syrians. Using interview data from leaders in three Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations, our grounded theory approach generated findings on ways that social mechanisms are used to ensure performance accountability when the organizations provide aid in the Middle East, specifically in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. Within these challenging environments, we find that diaspora organizations use informal social accountability mechanisms such as reputation, trust, social networks, and shaming to ensure that employees and organizational partners are held accountable to organizational leadership when delivering services. The origins and use of these accountability mechanisms differ from their use in many other non-profit organizations because they derive specifically from individuals' social network ties within the Syrian diaspora. Intricate family, friendship, and reputational networks that are unavailable to non-Syrians help these diaspora non-profits mitigate uncertainty and challenging conditions in the operational environment.

Research on diaspora non-profit organizations, and on the use of informal social accountability in non-profit organizations, has been limited. This paper contributes to both fields of inquiry by offering new insights into the specific ways diaspora organizations make use of informal social accountability mechanisms. Research on accountability mechanisms typically has focused on more formal aspects of accountability (for example, financial audits and reports), while informal social accountability has largely been ignored (Romzek et al. 2012). Romzek and colleagues (2012) examine what they term informal accountability (for example, the use of trust, reputation, social ties, and informal meetings) in organizational networks in the United States. Other studies of informal social mechanisms, such as repeated interaction, norms of reciprocity, facilitative behaviours, informal rewards and sanctions, and informal monitoring, also have been conducted in politically stable, economically developed countries such as Australia and the United States (Amirkhanyan 2009, 2010; Mandell and Keast 2007; Romzek et al. 2014). Tsai (2007) and Hossain (2010) observe what they term social accountability in the context of developing nations, examining mechanisms such as reputation, shaming, social prestige, and even beatings.

In this paper, we use the term social accountability to refer to the mechanisms identified above. We contribute to the current state of knowledge on accountability by adding to the limited literature on informal social mechanisms of accountability and examining the utility of these mechanisms in less stable, less economically developed contexts. We find that social accountability mechanisms become valuable tools when organizations are operating in a region where violent conflict is taking place and where legal and financial obstacles are ubiquitous. In Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, social accountability mechanisms are important as alternative or complementary tools to formal accountability. For example, when an organization cannot send its employees to conflict-ridden areas to assess what services are needed and to ensure that services are provided, social accountability is one means of addressing this information asymmetry.

These findings reflect an important theme in the extant literature on diaspora philanthropy: diaspora members may have an advantage over other actors because of dense personal networks

that make them adept at identifying dependable partners, and enforcing agreements even in places where banking and legal systems are fragile (Brinkerhoff 2011; Newland and Patrick 2004). For the purposes of this paper, we define diaspora non-profit organizations as organizations that are founded, led, and predominantly operated by members of a diaspora community, and that are engaged in diaspora philanthropy. We define diaspora philanthropy as diaspora members providing assistance in various forms (money, goods, volunteer labour, knowledge and skills, and other assets) for the social benefit of members of an ancestral community beyond the individuals' immediate family members, in a country or region where there is a population with whom the donor has ancestral ties.

Johnson (2007) calls diaspora philanthropy one of the least understood subfields of philanthropy, with Brinkerhoff (2014: 1) describing research on diaspora philanthropy as 'in its infancy'. Scholars agree that diaspora philanthropy seems not to be a strategic tool but an ad hoc practice (Newland and Patrick 2004; Sidel 2008). While some research speaks to potential comparative advantages offered by diaspora organizations (Brinkerhoff 2008, 2011; Johnson 2007; Newland and Patrick 2004), little if any research addresses internal organizational or management strategies of diaspora organizations. Our paper contributes to the literature on potential advantages of diaspora organizations, and begins a discussion of distinctive accountability strategies used by these organizations.

This study examines the use of social accountability in diaspora non-profit organizations operating in complex and dangerous political, legal, and financial contexts, thus adding to the literature on both diaspora philanthropy and social accountability in organizations. We begin by reviewing the literatures on diaspora philanthropy and social accountability, followed by a short overview of the current migration crisis generated by the ongoing conflict in Syria. We follow with the methodology for the study, and conclude by offering findings on how social accountability mechanisms are used in the complex operational environment of the Syrian conflict.

2 Literature on diaspora philanthropy

Diasporas are defined as 'ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin—their homelands' (Sheffer 1986: 3). Diaspora members have an emotional connection to a shared language, culture, and/or ancestral homeland that manifests as a feeling of membership in a unified community, despite members being physically spread across great distances (Werbner 2002). These emotional ties often generate an interest in the hardships endured by other diaspora members in the homeland and beyond (Best et al. 2013; Brinkerhoff 2008, 2011; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2016). Assistance to other members of the diaspora can serve as one means of expressing identity and demonstrating belonging to the community (Brinkerhoff 2011; Nielsen and Riddle 2009). A sense of responsibility generated by a comparatively high quality of life and cultural norms of mutual aid can serve as other motivations for aiding members of the diaspora (Brinkerhoff 2008, 2011; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2016; Tchouassi and Sikod 2010). As mentioned earlier, we define diaspora philanthropy as diaspora members providing assistance in myriad forms (money, goods, volunteer labour, knowledge and skills, and other assets) for the social benefit of members of an ancestral community beyond the individuals' immediate family members. Most studies of diaspora donors focus on business aspects, such as remittances and private investing, but fewer studies have been conducted on philanthropic practices among diaspora groups, making diaspora philanthropy one of the most poorly understood subfields of philanthropic practice (Brinkerhoff 2014; Johnson 2007).

2.1 Social networks and diaspora philanthropy

Most scholars agree that diaspora is largely informal and improvised (Newland and Patrick 2004; Sidel 2008). Diaspora philanthropy is a critical portion of remittances, which makes studies of remittances highly relevant to diaspora philanthropy. Research on remittances gives us important insights into the mechanisms through which diaspora philanthropy can occur. Family channels are critical to remittances (Sidel 2008), as are the social networks provided through clan associations (Sidel 2008; Tchouassi and Sikod 2010). Limited time, resources, and expertise mean that most migrants work through an intermediary to target aid to projects assisting the diaspora. Intermediary organizations can include ethnic and professional groups, neighbourhood and regional groups, home town associations, online giving platforms, faith-based organizations, diaspora foundations, and foreign-based ethnic NGOs, among others (Newland et al. 2010; Sidel 2008).

2.2 Advantages of diaspora philanthropy

In international development policy, much is made of the potential impact diaspora philanthropy may have on peace-building, economic development, and stability. Diaspora members are thought to have advantages when compared with larger multinational aid agencies and smaller non-local NGOs. One advantage is diaspora members' emotional commitment: their strong social and emotional connections may cause them to become involved in projects or communities not prioritized by other donors, and diaspora members may be less deterred by complications in the field (Brinkerhoff 2011, 2014). In fact, challenging conditions may serve as a motivator for some donors, particularly since diaspora members are aware that their social networks in the country of origin may increasingly rely on diaspora aid during challenging times (Brinkerhoff 2011; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2016; Lubkemann 2008).

Diaspora members may have a better understanding of context-specific needs and strategies than non-diaspora philanthropists or development professionals (Johnson 2007; Newland and Patrick 2004). Diaspora members may have better knowledge of and entrée to local organizations (Brinkerhoff 2008, 2011). Diaspora members may be skilled at ascertaining partners' reliability, and may be seen by those partners as more credible than other external actors (Newland and Patrick 2004). Additionally, diaspora members may have means of executing agreements using social norms and social networks in places where the legal and banking systems are fragile (Brinkerhoff 2011; Newland and Patrick 2004).

2.3 Challenges of diaspora philanthropy

For all the excitement around diaspora philanthropy, challenges abound. Concerns about equity and targeting aid to those most in need are paramount. Since diaspora philanthropy often relies on personal networks, those not tied to relevant networks may not have access to assistance (Bains 2014; Brinkerhoff 2008). Diaspora members often are interested in aiding individuals from their own group or region, which can worsen socio-economic disparities (Van Hear et al. 2010). Because diaspora aid is often amateur, ad hoc, and voluntary in nature, the priorities of diaspora donors may not align with the needs or priorities of beneficiaries, and effectiveness can be reduced (Newland et al. 2010; Salamon 1995). Davies (2010) cautions that diaspora philanthropy is very context-specific, and can be only one component of policy efforts to address poverty or alleviate conflict.

Our work adds to this literature by illuminating the internal organizational practices of Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations as intermediary organizations. The study contributes knowledge of how diaspora organizations ensure accountability through the same family and social network channels that are critical to transfer of remittances. In addition, our study adds to the literature on

advantages and drawbacks of diaspora philanthropy by further elucidating the role that social networks and social norms play in the operation of diaspora organizations.

3 Literature on informal or social accountability

Accountability mechanisms are used by organizations to ensure better performance, the legal and rightful use of resources, and equity (Behn 2001). Formal principal-agent accountability mechanisms such as audits, receipts, official communication, annual reports, and financial records are used to 'hold people responsible', but they face limitations in that they often do not take into account multiple principals or accountability to mission and values (Ebrahim 2003). Accountability is inherently relational (Ebrahim 2003), and formal accountability mechanisms often have limited application when considering networks of organizations operating collectively (Romzek et al. 2014), as are often found in humanitarian aid contexts. The limitations of formal accountability mechanisms are exacerbated when non-profit organizations operate in contexts of violent conflict, or where laws limit the work of humanitarian organizations (Brinkerhoff 2011). These limitations raise a need to better understand alternative forms of accountability, and accountability outside economically developed, politically stable countries.

Alternative forms of accountability, such as informal social accountability, are less prominent in the literature on organizational accountability, but studies exist. Most research on informal accountability has focused on the United States and on networks of organizations (Romzek et al. 2012, 2014), and information relevant to international contexts is limited. The few researchers focusing on informal accountability in developing countries (Bangladesh and China) have examined this concept within the context of the public sector, approaching it from the perspective of how citizens can use social strategies (such as shaming or beating) to affect accountability (Hossain 2010; Tsai 2007).

Repeated interactions, trust, norms of reciprocity, facilitative behaviours, informal rewards and sanctions, and informal monitoring (Amirkhanyan 2009, 2010; Mandell and Keast 2007; Romzek et al. 2014) are all key elements of a general theory about informal social accountability. Organizations or individuals in networks that use informal accountability mechanisms (such as off-the-record phone calls or informal meetings, rather than reporting a problem (Van Slyke 2007)) abide by shared norms and engage in facilitative behaviours, and then are rewarded with favours, future collaboration, public recognition, enhanced reputation, and advance notice of changes. However, if individuals and organizations violate shared norms and practices, they are sanctioned in the form of diminished reputation, loss of opportunities, and exclusion from the information network (Romzek et al. 2012).

One of the key shared norms that contributes to social accountability is trust. While it can be difficult to achieve (Ansell and Gash 2007), trust is crucial for successful collaboration (Brown et al. 2007; Emerson et al. 2012; Romzek et al. 2012), and results in numerous benefits (Klijn et al. 2010). Trust can play an important role in growth in countries with weak financial systems (Knack and Keefer 1997). Trust can improve information-sharing, reduce transaction costs, improve cooperation, reduce uncertainty, and facilitate innovation (Klijn et al. 2010; Romzek et al. 2014).

In tandem with trust, informal accountability is continuously reinforced by facilitative behaviours (Romzek et al. 2014). Facilitative behaviours are repetitive, and relationship- and information-based. Some examples of facilitative behaviours found in the United States include frequent and continued communication, sharing information, taking responsibility for and correcting mistakes, providing favours, and following through on commitments (Romzek et al. 2012). The relationship

between trust and shared norms is mutually reinforcing, with facilitative behaviours reinforcing shared norms such as trust, and shared norms increasing one's willingness to engage in facilitative behaviours (Romzek et al. 2012).

Finally, reputation is a key tool in the reward-and-sanction toolkit of informal social accountability. To ensure that accountability takes place, organizations and individuals in organizations can enhance the reputation of their partners professionally (Romzek et al. 2012) or socially (Tsai 2007). They can also tarnish that reputation. On the professional level, the reputation of employees and the organization might be based on strong performance, while on the social level employees' or partners' reputation is based on securing and distributing resources in a fair manner (Hossain 2010). The main tenets of informal accountability mechanisms presented by Romzek et al. (2012) apply to the work of diaspora organizations, since trust, reputation, and facilitative behaviour are applicable in different contexts.

4 Brief overview of the Syrian migration crisis

Emigration from Syria has a long history, but in the present day, attention is focused on the refugee crisis currently spurred by the Syrian civil war, an ever-evolving multiparty conflict that initially began with the Arab Spring protests in early 2011. As of July 2016, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees estimated that more than 4.8 million refugees had fled Syria, with over one million displaced Syrians residing in Lebanon and more than 2.7 million residing in Turkey (UNHCR 2016), two countries with particular relevance to this paper.

With a population estimated at only 4.6 million in 2012 (UN 2015),¹ Lebanon is one of the smallest host countries in the Middle East. 'No country in recent memory has taken on more refugees proportional to its size,' states UNHCR Representative to Lebanon Ninette Kelley (UNHCR 2014: 3). Many towns and villages are home to more Syrian refugees than Lebanese, with refugees living in more than 1,700 communities and more than 1,400 informal refugee settlements² (UNHCR 2015). Plagued by many years of civil war, subsequent sectarian conflict, and political impasses that disrupt government services, infrastructure in Lebanon was already weak prior to the Syrian conflict. The arrival of a large and vulnerable refugee population has created even greater strain on existing service systems (UNHCR 2014).

Although Turkey is a larger and wealthier country than Lebanon, Syrian refugees face many challenges there as well. The Turkish government assumed the Syrian conflict would resolve quickly when it first initiated its 'open-door' policy toward Syrian refugees, but is less able to handle the large and long-term challenges of aiding 2.7 million people. Initially most refugees resided in camps managed by the Turkish state and NGOs, which were regarded as high quality. However, as the conflict continues many refugees have become urban dwellers, taking shelter at their own expense in cities, yet unable to work in the formal economy due to a lack of work permits (İçduygu 2015). In both Lebanon and Turkey, local community relations are strained by growing grievances

¹ A population figure from 2012 is used because current Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book figures put the population of Lebanon at 6.1 million people, a figure that almost certainly includes the Syrian refugee population that has arrived since 2011.

² Because the Lebanese government does not recognize displaced Syrians as formal refugees, formal refugee camps operated by UNHCR or other humanitarian organizations do not exist. However, many hundreds of informal tent settlements have been created by refugees around the country.

against Syrians, who are viewed as taking jobs from locals, increasing housing costs and shortages, and contributing to political instability (İçduygu 2015).

Inside Syria, in addition to those who remain in their home towns only to suffer from frequent shelling and a lack of access to food, water, and medical care, there are an estimated 7.6 million internally displaced individuals (UNHCR 2015). The conflict between the Syrian regime and various rebel groups, as well as among rebel groups including Isis, has pushed millions of Syrians away from war-infested areas to safer areas, often only to be forced to move again as the conflict shifts. Both the violent conflict and large influxes of internally displaced individuals put tremendous pressure on often destroyed infrastructure, as well as on service delivery organizations. The absence of civilian protection, and attacks on civilian infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, parks, water networks, places of worship, and economic assets (UNICEF 2015: 7; Al-Jazeera 2016), has increased the need for services, but also increased the risk to international organizations that attempt to deliver services. Among the organizations working to serve individuals inside Syria and Syrian refugees are Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations funded and operated by individuals of Syrian ancestry in Europe, the Middle East, and North America.

5 Methodology

This paper is based on data collected using semi-structured interviews with individuals in leadership roles in three Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations that provide social services to Syrians inside and outside Syria. The interview protocol, based in part on a survey by Riddle and Brinkerhoff (2011) and an interview protocol by Soss (2000), contains questions that explore personal motivations for becoming involved in philanthropic activity, mechanisms by which diaspora members engage with individuals inside Syria and within the region, mechanisms for sending money and resources to the region and expectations of accountability for funds, mechanisms for assessing the success of an intervention, and links between philanthropy and individuals' perceptions of the broad political goals of the Syrian diaspora.

Interview participants were selected using a purposive sample based on individuals' leadership roles within Syrian philanthropic networks. Twenty-six diasporic Syrians who held leadership roles in three Syrian diaspora organizations were interviewed. We considered organization founders, board members, and individuals who directed key programmes and initiatives within the organization to be leaders, even if these roles were unpaid. We plan to increase our sample size in the future as we interview additional front-line staff and service recipients. However, because we interviewed individuals in leadership roles for this phase of the project, we found we reached saturation with 26 participants (Creswell 1998; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The individuals in the sample were engaged in activism, volunteering, donating money or resources, and other philanthropic activity targeted towards Syrians inside Syria and those displaced to other countries including Canada, Germany, Lebanon, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. All interview participants were Syrian or of Syrian descent with ongoing familial and friendship ties within Syria and the region. Interviews were conducted between February 2015 and August 2016. Interviews were conducted in person in Germany, Lebanon, and the United States, and by phone, Skype, or Google Hangout with individuals based in the Arabian Gulf, Europe, Lebanon, and North America. Most interviews were conducted in English, with eight interviews conducted in Arabic by a native Arabic speaker.

Many of these individuals are involved in efforts by multiple diaspora networks, and talked about their work with various initiatives in several countries. Because of our interest in the effectiveness

of informal social accountability mechanisms in the complex operating environments geographically proximate to the Syrian conflict, in this paper we focus specifically on interview data related to the organizations' efforts in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey.

6 Informal social accountability in Syrian diaspora non-profits

Facing logistical and security barriers that would challenge any organization, diaspora organizations continue to deliver assistance in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey five years into the Syrian conflict. According to data from the study's interviews, these organizations depend on informal social tools of accountability to deliver their services. They work with trusted individuals to act as displaced persons' agents (Romzek et al. 2014), deliver services, and move money to targeted recipients. Because trust is critical for service delivery in the context of wars and where financial limitations to assistance exist, diaspora members choose to work with individuals from their trusted social networks, and use social accountability mechanisms to ensure services are delivered.

Diaspora organizations overcome financial and security barriers in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey because of the connections they enjoy within their social networks. Social networks allow diaspora organizations' members to access resources that make them more productive, such as accessing people operating in conflict areas who have the trust and credibility of the different fighting groups and who can deliver services needed by Syrian citizens. Social networks are assumed to have value that is similar to economic and human resources (El-Said and Harrigan 2009; Putnam 2000) that can improve the success of an individual or organization. As an example, a trusted Syrian individual who directly accesses a diaspora organization's US bank account to use funds in Lebanon ensures that the organization is able to operate refugee schools and pay its teachers. This would be impossible otherwise, since Syrian organizations are viewed with suspicion in Lebanon, making it difficult for organizations to formally register as NGOs and open bank accounts. Even if the organization had a bank account, US banking regulations make it exceedingly difficult to transfer money to the region. In the cases of Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, diaspora organizations' members build on their social networks to determine trusted individuals who can assist them in delivering services in inaccessible areas, in evaluating local needs, and in dealing with daily operations of the organization.

The dire security situation in Syria makes it nearly impossible for leaders of diaspora organizations to visit Syria on a regular basis. Diaspora organizations' collaboration with other entities becomes essential. Diaspora organizations hire or collaborate with other organizations or individuals who can represent them on the ground or deliver services on their behalf. However, choosing an appropriate partner is crucial for diaspora organizations' leaders. Diaspora organizations' leaders depend on trusted social networks to choose these partners. In the absence of formal tools such as the ability to take legal action against partners that do not deliver, diaspora organizations need to find individuals and/or organizations that they can trust to limit the impact of a failed partnership. In peaceful countries where the state is operating, it is easier to hold people and organizations accountable; however, in war-torn countries or countries that institute legal and financial limitations on non-profits, diaspora organizations face major obstacles. The trusted individuals deliver the services themselves, or facilitate introductions between diaspora leaders and humanitarian efforts inside Syria. These trusted contacts provide diaspora organizations with an assessment of interpersonal behaviour, confidence in organizational competence and expected performance, and a common bond and sense of goodwill (Bryson et al. 2006).

One diaspora member summarizes it thus:

I think [it's important] being Syrian, and also Syrians working together. Like I said, we usually work with people who are from there, or people who even live in the US but who have family there who they trust. I mean it's very important, transparency, who you trust, where you're sending the money to, especially during this time it's very important. Being aware of the politics that's going on the ground. It's definitely a responsibility that we take really seriously.

6.1 The 'good names': identifying trusted partners

In collaborative networks, trusted individuals share information and knowledge about needs, with the intention of better serving people (Arino and de la Torre 1998; Bryson et al. 2006; Merrill-Sands and Sheridan 1996). The ability to identify trusted individuals through diasporic social networks gives diaspora organizations the advantage of having 'eyes on the ground' in places where conflict makes it harder for humanitarian organizations to act. The diaspora members trust key individuals, and respond to the needs of the community on the basis of the trusted individual's assessment. Trusted individuals also provide channels for moving money, goods, and expertise into communities that might otherwise be difficult to access (Sidel 2008; T'chouassi and Sikod 2010.)

When choosing potential partners, diaspora organizations benefit from their connections to their home country's social networks. Syrian social networks have traditionally been dense and strong (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993; Leenders and Heydemann 2012; Stevens 2016). Social networks can be based on regional affiliation, religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. They resemble informal institutions that assist members on both the material and social levels (El-Said and Harrington 2009).

Social networks in Middle Eastern countries are based on trust and reciprocity (El-Said and Harrington 2009). Diaspora organizations build on the embedded trust available in social networks to select people and organizations with whom they can collaborate. These individuals in turn will provide diaspora members with information on what is happening in local organizations. Hence, the trust embedded in social networks also provides diaspora organizations with means to hold their partners accountable for delivering services. Trusted individuals act as a mechanism of social accountability that allows diaspora organizations to detect any goal conflict (Meyers et al. 2001; Romzek et al. 2014). If the trusted person reports that a partner organization has political or financial motives that do not align with the diaspora organization's objective, then collaboration may end. As one young American of Syrian descent described it:

The organizations I work with, I know the people personally that work within the organization, so you really do know what's going on, what the motives are, is there an agenda, is there not. Versus the organization [mentions a Syrian diaspora organization], the reason why we were very sceptical was because, well, we didn't see any people that we know, it was just the idea that we've never seen this organization, what exactly is their agenda; you do feel sceptical when you're not familiar. And that might be a bad thing where we happen to be very exclusive at times, where maybe Syrians are a little more superstitious or just kind of more sceptical, but we're very much a close-knit community. If you're from Damascus, you're for sure well known wherever you are. If you live in Damascus, your mum's going to know where her mum is from and what family they're from and who went to this school and what her dad does, like, somehow they find out, I don't know. It's mind-boggling. It's so weird. It's interesting, it's comforting, and it's

something that I really like about our Syrian community, like, wow, we all know each other. Like, you give my mum a last name and she'll know... I don't know how.

As another Syrian businessman residing in Lebanon explains:

The way we operate somehow reflects how Syrians are now living. Most of the founders are not in Syria. It's only me in Lebanon, and all the other founders are in the United Arab Emirates. So what we do is that we have operatives in each region. We have an operative in the south [of Syria]... and we have two operatives in the north [of Syria], and they manage all seven schools, and we also partner with the local community for the renovation part. So basically we don't do anything operationally, the founders are not involved in the operation, what we do is we get the funds, and then we find the proper partner to do the renovation for us. Most of the founders were involved in what's going on in Syria, so we have our networks, we have our contacts, we have our friends and our families who are part of what is going on. So this is how we started, then the good names are easy to figure out.

6.2 Trust and assessment of local needs

Having an accurate assessment of local needs can be a major challenge for humanitarian NGOs, especially in contexts of conflict where service environments are challenging and dynamic. As one diaspora interviewee indicates:

They [larger humanitarian NGOs] basically shove down your throat what they think you need, and then that's also how you get very angry people. You also get a lot of unrest that way, you know if people are saying we don't want any more food baskets, we actually are looking for jobs, and an NGO just keeps sending us food baskets, then that's a problem. And what people end up doing is selling those food baskets, or it gets into the wrong hands, or it starts to become this mafia style, you know, selling and buying, you know it becomes a mess. That [accurately understanding local needs] is a very huge point that we at our foundation make sure to do.

Depending on social networks to choose partners who can assist in delivering services allows diaspora organizations to have a better assessment of service recipients' needs (Johnson 2007; Newland and Patrick 2004). These partner organizations or individuals act as citizens' advocates. They define their role and identity in terms of 'relationships and not rules' (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: 20). Living in the community provides these partners with a comparative advantage when it comes to assessing local needs.

As one interviewee indicates:

These programmes came because we go and ask people what they need. When we distribute aid for example, we ask people, 'what kind of things do you need?' and they say, 'we need heating fuel for winter,' so that's what we provide. We basically provided a big tanker, a big oil tanker that was giving out heating fuel, and people lined up in Aleppo, in the outskirts of Aleppo, for heating fuel. You can keep throwing them clothes, when they're like, 'we got our jacket from last year, what are we going to do with a brand new jacket this year?' But since we have people we trust there, we can find out the greatest need in that moment. And because we

are flexible we don't have to stick to a budget that says, 'well this money is for clothing.' We can say, 'forget clothing, use that money to buy heating fuel, that's what people say they need.'

6.3 Trust and financial accountability

Moving funds into Lebanon and Syria can be very challenging due to strict banking regulations regarding Lebanon by the United States government and some European governments, and the disrupted financial system in Syria. Reliance on trusted partners becomes crucial as diaspora organizations move funds into countries where they provide aid and services. Repetitive interaction with partners tests trust and ensures that the right partner is chosen. Partners display competency and transparency, which continues to reinforce the diaspora organization's trust. Many of these partners mix aspects of their personal and professional lives in order to help the diaspora organization operate and achieve its goals. As one diasporic interviewee notes:

We know him [our contact in Lebanon] and we have a lot of trust in him... He is very, very meticulous about tracking every dollar that is spent, and he keeps it in a spreadsheet that he updates every month. And he sends me it, at the end of every month. It's really, really hard to open a bank account in Lebanon as a Syrian, which he is. And we're trying to get registered there [as an NGO] but as you can imagine everything takes forever, and so as of now we don't have a bank account in Lebanon, so he actually ends up withdrawing money every day from our US account, but he is withdrawing it from ATMs in Lebanon. So it is very clunky but there is no other way to make it work... I think for us, it really comes down to the fact that we have our own person on the ground. He is literally the one who is withdrawing the money and paying everyone and stuff, and so given that, and given the fact that we put some tracking mechanism in place. Literally, these schools, to run now it is hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. So it's not like, oh, here and there a couple hundred bucks, it's a real operation, and the current set-up is not ideal, because in Lebanon there is a limit to how much money can be withdrawn each day, and we're paying fees. But literally there is just no other way to get that much money in. We're working on being registered over there, but as you can imagine, anything that has Syria involved in it in any way, shape, or form, they're not running to help us get registered, so it's just hard.

Having someone trusted allows diaspora organizations to overcome financial barriers in Lebanon and Syria. Funds are entrusted to individuals who deliver needed funds to partners inside Syria, thus dodging the financial and security barriers caused by the Syrian civil war. Another diasporic interviewee explains:

Getting money into Syria, you cannot call it nothing but a nightmare. It is really a nightmare because as you know many restrictions are being put on money transfers, and especially when it comes to the military regime territory, where the extremists are around. It's not very easy to do business or to do any sort of financial transaction, so it is difficult, it is complicated, it is a nightmare, you can call it whatever you want. As I said, because we are registered in France we managed to get a bank account there, and when we send the funds to our bank account in France the journey starts. So we try to send some money to some trusted affiliate NGOs in Turkey, then get the money from Turkey to Syria. This is for the north part. For the south part we manage it through Lebanon, we transfer the money to some friends or some person we know well in Lebanon, then we pay it in Lebanon so they can get it to the south. It used to be that people carried

money across the border. Now we have some good networks where you can get the money whenever you want and you can pay it directly inside. But this is not available all the time and it's not for free, it will cost us a percentage. It's really complicated. We try to do a lot of documentation to what we're doing just to avoid any problems, because sometimes you have to give the money to someone you know who lives in a neighbourhood where it's not very safe, or even handling cash in Syria is not really safe, so it is complicated.

In these sorts of extremely informal and variable environments, the value of highly trusted contacts to handle funds in-country cannot be overstated. It is worth noting that the two interview participants above are graduates of two of the world's most prestigious business schools, and are well aware of the amateur and ad hoc nature of the financial process. As one commented, 'to be honest, the whole thing makes me queasy. But when we realized the choice was to help with a very imperfect system, or not to help, we knew we still had to help.'

6.4 Reputation as reward and sanction

To ensure the success of the vetting process and the delivery of services, diaspora organizations depend on a key informal accountability tool: reputation (Hossain 2010; Romzek et al. 2012; Tsai 2007). Reputation is a tool used to sanction or reward partners professionally and socially. Social reputation is an end objective. Social reputation motivates people, since it provides a certain prestige in their community (Hossain 2010; Tsai 2007). In the case of professional reputation, the objective is more transactional in nature: to ensure future collaboration (Romzek et al. 2014). If individuals or organizations lose some of their reputation, then their ability to collaborate with new and existing organizations decreases. This will automatically be reflected on their social reputation, since they will not be able to capture and distribute resources to those in need. In the cases of Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, diaspora organizations are concerned about their own reputation, and use reputation as a tool to ensure that their partners deliver services and assess local needs accurately.

As one interviewee indicated:

So there's certainly a vetting process, there is certainly documentation that we need from them, pictures, you know, we need receipts. Like all of that kind of stuff. But at the end of the day we're working in a conflict zone, it is a war zone. But there is a vetting process as much as possible. We do try and meet with people in person when we're in Turkey as much as possible. Usually the contact comes from an already existing trusted person or organization that we work with, so we get that introduction. As an organization, humanitarian, your reputation is everything on the ground. Whether it's ours or someone else's, reputation is a big part of what we do. We make sure to maintain our reputation, but also pay attention to the reputation of our partner, because who we work with is extremely important to our reputation.

In this case, competent service delivery and accurate assessment of needs builds the reputation and trust of the partnering individual/organization, and rewards both the diaspora organization and the local partner with a better professional and social reputation.

Another important role that reputation plays within the diaspora network is with the person making the recommendation for a contact. There are high stakes when it comes to recommending an organization or individual, because the performance of that contact can affect the recommender's reputation as well. Hence members of the diaspora network will make a great deal

of effort to ensure that a trusted and well-respected person is recommended, and will avoid recommending any potential partner that they are not confident will be effective and trustworthy.

6.5 Reaching outside the network: the value of face-to-face meetings

Of course, the complex environments in which diaspora organizations operate mean that the correct individuals to provide appropriate aid, logistical support, and services do not always exist within the diaspora network. In these cases, diaspora organizations must reach outside the diaspora network to other individuals and organizations. In our interviews, we found that in these instances face-to-face meetings were key. Face-to-face meetings have proven to substantially increase cooperation in other settings (Ostrom 2000; Ostrom and Walker 1997). In this study, interview participants indicated that face-to-face meetings allowed them to determine the trustworthiness of an individual or organization, and to determine whether to work with them. Leaders of diaspora organizations combine information from their social network about the individuals they meet, and then establish a personal connection with them. From a cultural perspective, both parties are engaging in a social contract based on trust. Breaking this social contract will have effects on both entities' reputations and social standing in their community, hence creating a form of informal accountability. This finding goes hand in hand with Ostrom's (2000) focus on the mechanism of face-to-face meetings.

As one interviewee indicated:

All of our humanitarian aid goes inside Syria. So we definitely have an intermediary. We work with Syrian organizations and non-profits. And you know it's really hard, so we have to go through trusted avenues. A lot of our job when we go there on the ground is to have meetings with different orgs that come from inside Syria. I mean they drive, like, three hours to come and meet with us [in Turkey], or we're introduced by an already existing partnership that we work with, but we do give them money for specific, like I said, for heating fuels, for blankets, or for food distribution. I mean those things that we can't personally, as a foundation we can't go inside Syria and do. It's not possible.

In this case, the experience of meeting personally with organizational leaders who are willing to travel from Syria into Turkey gives diaspora members a feeling of reassurance that the individuals or organizations can be trusted. A screening process takes place in which diaspora members first engage in a social network assessment of the reputation of the potential partner, and if the reputation seems strong, a face-to-face meeting is arranged. Once collaboration is established, repetitive interactions can reinforce diaspora members' trust that the partner is delivering on their promises.

One thing diaspora members assess in these meetings is if the objectives of the potential partner align with those of the diaspora organization (Romzek et al. 2014). An alignment of objectives can ensure mutual benefits for the organizations and service recipients. As one interviewee indicated:

I met him two years ago. [Discloses the individual's company and position within the company.] In other words, he comes from a background of effectiveness. He's clean, he's not corrupt, he's effective. The government job for him is because of the feeling it is his duty to help as much as he can. He doesn't need that job. He doesn't need to be a minister. He just needs to use the function to produce good results. So in this case, I will go and I will help. Forgive this absolutely poor analogy but it is a little bit like marriage. You want to have a child. With whom? Who would

I commit to, to be able to have a better future for our children? And that is the case also with partnerships.

7 Conclusion

Data from this study of three Syrian diaspora organizations providing aid and services in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey indicate that social trust is critical for the functioning of these networked partnerships. This aligns well with what is shown in the existing literature on informal and social accountability (Emerson et al. 2012; Romzek et al. 2012; Van Slyke 2007). Diaspora members have the ability to rely on their dense social networks for referrals of potential partners, and can draw upon reputational information present in that network to assess the potential trustworthiness and effectiveness of these partners. Diaspora members also can rely on the unique assets other diaspora members provide (use of personal bank accounts, willingness to deliver cash by hand, physical travel across international borders, and the like) to navigate around specific logistical challenges common in contexts of conflict. In the absence of social network ties, diaspora members rely on reputation and face-to-face contact to assess the viability of partnerships.

In addition to these advantages, diaspora members' reliance upon and embeddedness in the social network brings limitations as well. Since trust is a major factor for the delivery of aid, these diaspora organizations often tend to focus their service delivery in places where they have network contacts, rather than other places where the need might be higher but the knowledge of local actors is less certain. As one interview participant explains:

We provide 1,000 babies with this milk formula. We've kind of adopted this village, again because we know the town and the people. We usually work from someone who is from there, and make that contact, and then work from there. So a lot of our winter packages go to that town, or the support goes to the areas with people that we know. We know there is a lot of need out there but that's sort of all we can do at the end of the day, work in places where we know people.

This observation supports the notion that, for all its promise, diaspora philanthropy can be only one prong of a multipronged approach to delivering humanitarian aid (Davies 2010). While diaspora members have unique strategies and strengths that derive from their social network ties, those advantages only reach as far as their social network extends.

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